

COLLAPSIBLE BALLOT BOX

Cross-Reference to Related Application

This application is a continuation of application no. 10/072,093, filed on February 8, 2002, which claims benefit under 35 U.S.C. § 119(e) of U.S. Provisional Application, Serial No. 60/275,375 filed March 13, 2001, the complete disclosure thereof being incorporated by reference.

Background of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to a ballot box, and more particularly to a collapsible ballot box which may be utilized with electronic ballot scanning devices.

Voting systems - the procedures by which we cast votes and elect our public officials - are a crucial part of the democratic election process. Typically, marked ballot cards are deposited in sealed ballot boxes at the polling location. The sealed ballot boxes are then transported to a central location where the votes are tallied, either by hand counting or by use of an electronic tallying device. Because ballot collection takes place at a location different from the counting location, the possibility of tampering with ballots exists. For example,

ballot cards can be removed from the ballot collection box while in transit to the counting location.

Thus, the need for a more secure voting system exists. One such improved system involves the use of an electronic ballot tabulator at the place of voting whose size is roughly close to that of a mechanical adding machine. This tabulator accepts printed ballots that have been marked by the voter, through an inlet slot. Then after tabulating the voter's selections, the machine ejects the ballot card through a discharge slot. In a more elaborate form, the ballot tabulating machine can be provided with one or more additional discharge slots, so that ballots of one category, such as write-in ballots, can be ejected through one slot, and ballots of another category, such as marked ballots, can be ejected through another slot, allowing for separate storage of the two ballot types. It is envisioned that many jurisdictions will promulgate regulations requiring that all tabulated ballots be retained in secure containers. It will, therefore, be necessary to provide ballot boxes capable of collecting the tabulated ballots of different categories directly from the tabulator machine and maintain them in separate and secure chambers.

It will further be necessary that such a ballot box provide a support for the tabulating machine such that the machine is at a convenient height for the voter to insert his

ballot. It must be stable enough to support the weight of the machine and a leaning voter. Also, it must provide tamper proof ballot compartments.

It is also necessary that a ballot box be compact for convenience of transport and storage. Moreover, it must be economical to manufacture.

In view of the aforementioned needs and the shortcomings of the prior art, it is, therefore, a general object of the present invention to provide a ballot box for use with an electronic ballot tabulator which will receive tabulated ballots directly from the ballot tabulating machine and retain the ballots in separate, secure compartments.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a ballot box that is collapsible for storage and transport.

It is yet another object of the present invention to provide a ballot box which has a separate auxiliary compartment that can receive ballots temporarily, if, for some reason, the ballot tabulating machine becomes inoperative.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide a ballot box which is secure of tampering and fraud during the voting, counting and/or transporting of ballot cards.

These and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will be clearly understood through a consideration of the following detailed description.

Summary of the Invention

According to the present invention, there is provided a collapsible ballot box having a base assembly with a top surface including a slot for receiving a ballot. Front and rear support assemblies are pivotally attached to the base assembly. The rear support assembly further forms a compartment for receiving ballots. The support assemblies are positionable to positions generally parallel to the base assembly to form a compact unit for storage.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The features of the present invention which are believed to be novel are set forth with particularity in the appended claims. The invention, together with the further objects and advantages thereof, may best be understood by reference to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in the several figures of which like reference numerals identify like elements, and in which:

Figure 1 is a perspective view of a collapsible ballot box constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention in an assembled upright state for voting.

Figure 2 is a side elevational view of the collapsible ballot box of Figure 1.

Figure 3 is a rear elevational view of the collapsible ballot box of Figure 1.

Figure 4 is a top perspective view of collapsible ballot box of the invention in a storage or transport state.

Figure 5 is a bottom perspective view of the collapsible ballot box of Figure 4.

Figures 6A-6F are frontal perspective views of the ballot box of Figures 1-5 showing the steps involved in setting up the ballot box from a transportable or storage state to its voting state.

Figure 6G is a rear perspective view of the ballot box of Figure 6F.

Figure 7 is a partial cross-sectional side view of the collapsible ballot box of Figures 1-6 in a storage or transport state.

Figure 8 is a semi-cross-sectional view of the collapsible ballot box of Figure 7 taken along lines 8-8.

Figures 9A and 9B through 11A and 11B are top and side views, respectively, partially in section, of the collapsible ballot box of the invention depicting the relationship of the principal elements of the ballot compartments during set up.

Figures 12A-2E are front perspective views of the base assembly of the collapsible ballot box of the invention depicting the installation of an electronic voting device on the ballot

box.

Figures 13A and 13B are side cross-sectional views illustrating the routing of the tabulated ballots discharged from the ballot tallying machine into appropriate ballot compartments in the collapsible ballot box of the invention.

Figure 14 is a perspective view of the locking mechanism for the retaining member and top cover of the ballot box.

Figure 15A and 15B are perspective views of a preferred rod and seal security assembly utilized by the collapsible ballot box of the present invention.

Description of the Preferred Embodiment

Referring to the Figures, and particularly to Figures 1-3, a collapsible ballot box 10 constructed in accordance with the principles of one embodiment of the present invention is shown set-up in its operable or voting state. In this preferred embodiment, the ballot box consists of three major components capable of folding or collapsing into a suitcase-like unit with wheels 12 and a handle 14. These three components include an elongated base assembly 16 for housing and locking a ballot tabulating machine 18, a front support assembly 20 and a rear support assembly 22.

The top assembly 16 includes a receptacle or recess 24 for receiving an electronic vote tabulating device 18 and a lockable retaining member 26 for preventing removal of the device. Power and/or communication means (modem, cable, etc.) can be supplied to voting device 18 via a tube 42. A cover or shield 28 is pivotably attached to the housing 17 of base assembly 16 via piano-style hinges 30 or the like. Shield 28 serves a number of purposes. First, as a privacy shield by maintaining the voter's selections private as he or she feeds a marked ballot into ballot tally machine 18. The shield 28 also acts as an equipment transport shield, preventing tampering with or removal of the vote tabulating machine 18. For example, after set-up and during the election process, if the collapsible ballot box 10 is to be left unattended, the wings 32 of the shield can be folded inward and the locking tabs 34 utilized to secure the shield over the vote tabulator in conjunction with the pins of locking mechanism 26. This lock-down status is also useful during transport as it serves to protect the ballot tabulator 18. The base assembly 16 further includes a wheel recess 36 and a rib recess 38 to support and stabilize, via wheels 12 and ribs 40 respectively, the stacking of multiple units 10 during storage.

The front support assembly is preferably secured to the top housing 16 by a piano-type hinge 44 running the width of both assemblies. This front support assembly 20 also serves a number

of functions. First, the wheels 12 and handle 14 enable the unit 10 to be rolled about in its voting and transport states. The front support assembly 20 is also an auxiliary storage container for ballots not processed by the ballot tally machine 18 if, for some reason, the machine 18 is inoperable or not available. In this event, the top slot access door 46 enables ballots to be deposited, while the bottom access door 48 allows ballots to be removed from the compartment for counting. Both doors 46 and 48 preferably include locking assemblies 50 to prevent tampering.

Like the front support assembly 20, the rear support assembly 22 is preferably secured to the top housing 16 by a piano-type hinge 45 running the width of the assemblies. The rear support assembly 22 includes accordion-hinged side panels 52 which fold inward and the front panel 54 folds toward the back panel 56 to form a compact storage and transport unit. The ballot assembly has a folding divider panel that divides the assembly into, preferably, two compartments. One compartment can be used, for example, for marked ballots, while the other compartment can be used for write-in ballots. An access door 58 on the front panel 54 and an access door 60 on the back panel 56 of the rear support assembly provide access to each individual compartment. Like the front support assembly 20, locking assemblies 50 are included on each door for security.

Referring now to Figures 4 and 5, the collapsible ballot box unit 10 is shown in its collapsed transport or storage state. Here, the rear support assembly 22 is fully nested within the housing 17 of base assembly 16. Side latches 62 lock the base assembly and front support assembly together for easy transport via handle 14 and wheels 12. As previously discussed, the shield 28 is in its closed and locked-down position within locking assembly 26.

The principal steps of the set-up procedure from the transport or storage state to the operably or voting state of ballot box 10 illustrated in Figures 6A-6G. After unit 10 is rolled to the desired set up area, it is positioned upright as shown in Figure 5. After the side latches 62 are unlatched, unit 10 is laid on its side and opened to approximately a 90° angle by extending the top housing 17 away from the front support assembly 20 via hinge 44, as shown in Figure 6A. Figures 6B and 6C illustrate the swinging of the rear support assembly 22 out of the top housing 17 via hinge 44 until opened to approximately a 90° angle. Now, the rear support assembly 22 is unfolded by extending the front panel 54 away from the rear panel 56. During this extension, as shown in Figures 6D and 6E, the side panels 52 will unfold outward from their collapsed state. Also, as shown in Figure 6E, the compartment attachment plate 64 is folded into place from the front support assembly 20 and attached to the rear

support assembly 22, and the shield 28 is lifted from its lock-down transport state within the locking member 26 to an open position for voting. The attachment plate or support assembly can be pivotally attached to either one of the front or rear support assemblies and detachably attached to the other. Figures 6F and 6G show front and rear perspective views of the ballot box set-up in an operable or voting position above an underlying support surface.

The inner compartment elements of the rear support assembly 22 of the present embodiment are described in Figures 7 - 11. Referring first to Figures 7 and 8, the collapsible ballot box 10 is shown in cross-section in its collapsed state. As such, the internal dimensions of the principal components of the rear support assembly 22 are more clearly illustrated. The back panel 56 of the assembly 22 is hinged to top housing 17 at hinge 45. Thus, there is interior space within top housing 17 for receiving the assembly 22. What will become the floor 66 of the ballot compartment of assembly 22 is pivotably attached to rear panel 56 at pivot 68. Pivotably attached to the floor 66 at pivot 70 is what will become the ballot compartment divider 72. What will become the side panels 52 of the assembly 22 are pivotably attached to their respective sides at pivot 74 and pivotably attached to the front 54 and rear 56 panels at pivot 76.

Referring now to Figures 9 - 11, the unfolding of the rear support assembly 22 is now shown through the semi-cross-sectional top and side views of these figures. Figures 9A, 10A and 11A illustrate the top view while Figures 9B, 10B and 11B illustrate the corresponding side view. These figures show the progression of the panels, floor and divider as the front panel 54 is extended away from the rear panel 56. Note the attachment of the divider 72 with the rear panel 56 at 78 in Figure 10A. The preferred securement means is a pivotably attached elongated rigid member (78) that enables the divider 72 to settle at a perpendicular position with the floor 66 when the assembly 22 is in the operable state, thereby acting as a divider wall for the ballot compartments. It will be understood that the ballot assembly must inherently include means to prevent access to the internal compartments unless entered through the doors. In the preferred embodiment, all of the movable panels are locked in place when set-up is complete. Such locks are discussed herein (supra) with respect to the locking assembly 26, but may also include a number of locking members or guards 80 (Figure 11B).

The base assembly 16 of the preferred embodiment will now be described in Figures 12A-E as it relates to the electronic ballot tabulating machine 18 to be used in conjunction with the present invention. Figure 12A shows the shield 28 raised to provide access to the recess 24, connection means 42 and the slot

in the base assembly 16 by which ballots are fed from the ballot tabulating machine 18 through to the respective subcompartments of the rear support assembly 22. Figure 12B shows the electronic tabulating device 18 fitted within the recess 24 of the base assembly 16. The locking assembly 26 then locks the device 18 within the recess of top housing 17 (Figure 12D). The wings 32 of shield 28 can be exposed and rested on the housing (Figure 12C), or the wings 32 can be folded into the shield 28 and the ballot tabulating device 18 will be locked thereunder when the locking tabs 34 receive the locking pins of locking assembly 26 (Figure 12E).

The present invention can incorporate a ballot sorting device or a ballot deflector device in communication with the ballot tabulating device 18. Such a deflector is shown in Figures 13A and 13B. As previously discussed, the rear support assembly 22 can be divided via divider 72 into two subcompartments, a front subcompartment 82 and a rear subcompartment 84. The deflector 86, in response to the ballot tabulating device's determination, for example, of a voted ballot or a write-in ballot (i.e. control effect), will route the ballot 88 into the respective compartment.

The locking assembly 26 of the preferred embodiment is more specifically described in Figure 14. The actuator thereof consists of a keylock 90 connected to locking pins 92. These

locking pins 92 are positioned via brackets 94 to extend through a hole 96 in the base housing 17. This locking assembly 26 can, therefore, secure the unit 10 for transport/storage by locking down the shield 28, and/or can secure the unit 10 during use by locking in the ballot tabulating device 18.

For additional security, the locking assembly 26, as well as the integral parts of the rear support assembly 22, can utilize the pin and seal locking components shown in Figure 15. With respect to the locking assembly 26, the locking pins 92 thereof pass through holes 96 in housing 17 and can be clasped with a one-time wire seal 98. Similarly, the panels of the rear support assembly 22 may similarly utilize pins 100 in communication with holes 102 and can be sealed by similar one-time wire seals 98.

The ballot box of the invention can be economically manufactured from a high-impact thermo plastic using conventional molding techniques. It will be appreciated that the ballot box can, in an alternate embodiment, be designed with a single ballot container in the rear support assembly, and that the auxiliary ballot compartment in the front support assembly can be omitted if not required.

While a particular embodiment of the invention has been shown and described, it will be obvious to those skilled in the art that changes and modifications may be made therein without

departing from the invention in its broader aspects and, therefore, the aim in the appended claims is to cover all such changes and modifications as fall within the true spirit and scope of the invention.